

# GURUPALLI

By Shivani

(Translated from *Aamader Shantiniketan* by Masooma Ali)

My memory begins to turn like a Tibetan prayer wheel when I think of the teachers who inspired me at Shantiniketan. So many faces, serene and grave, cheerful and stern, appear on it by turns and fade away. The entire faculty stands in front of me like a benign moneylender who does not remind you of the debt you own him.

I had the first glimpse of the most reverend Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in 1935. He was fair like marble, with eyes that shone like bright lights. His forehead was marked with a sandalwood paste *tikka*. He wore a flowing black robe and a black cap. This was Lie man loved by all the inmates of the *ashram*. So great and yet so disarmingly simple. Rich and poor, young and old, all enjoyed equal treatment under his serene patronage. As soon as the bell rang in the morning, students from China, Japan and Srilanka and all parts of India would assemble and stand with their heads bowed in front of the library. Among them were Fan Tsu, a Buddhist girl from China, Khairud-din, a Muslim boy from Sumatra, and Sushila and Kumudini from Gujarat and Kerala respectively. All would pray and meditate in harmony. Nobody indulged in rowdy behaviour. The secret of such a serene and disciplined life style at the *ashram* was Gurudev's gentle handling of the administration.

I was admitted as a pupil of the *Paath Bhawan*. Dr. Dhirendra Mohan Sen, who was the Principal at that time, took my sister and me to *Uttarayan*, Gurudev was sitting in *Shyamali*, writing something. It was late evening. I caught my first glimpse of that divine presence in the magical glow of the red light fading out into dusk. We paid obeisance. He placed his hand on my head and said with a laugh 'Are you sad away from home? You will never miss home once you have learnt Bengali. Wait, I will introduce you to Poopay!' He called out to his favourite attendant, 'Poopay, will you ask *Didi* to come here?'

He introduced us to his two grand-daughters and invited us to dine with him. At the dinner table he introduced us to Pratima Devi. 'These girls have come from far. That is why they are a little upset. Show them the rehearsals. They would enjoy them.' Rehearsals for 'Varsharnangal' were in progress at that time. We were taken on a conducted tour of *Uttarayan* by Nandita Kripalani whose pet name was Burhi. The whole of *Uttarayan* was very artistically appointed. The lounge where the rehearsal was on was the airiest part of the building. Through the polished, clear glass windows on all four sides, Gurudev's garden could be seen in all its glory. From inside the room the garden looked like a rainbow painted in pastel colours. Inside, one side of the room was decorated with artistically arranged, shining brass pitchers from Kumaon. A wide divan from Jamnagar was placed close to the pitchers. Reclining against black Burmese cushions and a bolster, Gurudev was supervising the rehearsal personally. Sitting close to him on the floor were Sailajaranjan Majumdar, Shantimoy Ghose, Sisir Da, Santosh Da and the singers from the *ashram*. Nivedita Di was dancing on the smooth floor. Our

spirits revived instantly as we listened to the rhythmic jingling of her ankle bells. She was dancing to the melodious song

My heart dances today as dances a peacock.  
My joy spreads out in many splendoured hues  
As the peacock's fan.  
The restless heart looks at the sky  
Expectantly

Tall and graceful Nivedita Di had a perfectly proportioned body. She moved, turned and glided as Shanti Da conducted the rehearsal in his bass voice accompanied by the honeysweet singing of Amit Da in between the words of the song. Sushil Da had carefully combed long hair and side burns that extended down to his ear lobes. He played on absorbedly, with his eyes closed and his neck resting on the *Sitar*. I wonder where that exquisite musician is now. No concert at the *ashram* could be complete without Sushil Da at that time. The audience was spellbound the moment his long, slender fingers touched the chords of *Sitar*. People who have listened to Gurudev's beautiful song-

What wind has intoxicated  
My feelings———  
My heart dances with  
Inexplicable joy

Can not forget SiishilDa's original *meends* and melodious *jhalas*. I can hear echoes of those<sup>1</sup> exquisite strains occasionally in the music of Mirza Halim Jafar Khan, Sushil Da was one of the very few people who are born with a natural gift for *Sitar* music.

I picked up Bengali gradually and enjoyed learning it. I had the privilege of being initiated into the Bengali alphabet by Gurudev himself. He gave me the first book *Sehajpath* from which I started learning. A lesson in the book was titled *Bane thake bagh, Gachhe Thake Paakhi* (Tigers live in a forest and Birds live on trees). I learnt it by heart and got very excited when I repeated it in front of Gurudev. Merrily, I announced "Gachhe Thake Bagh, Bane Thake Paakhi". Charu Babu, the famous novelist, happened to be sitting with Gurudev. His flabby body shook with benign laughter at my recitation. Before I could react, I saw Gurudev's face light up with a gentle smile as he said, "Do tigers live on trees in your part of the country?" I was thoroughly embarrassed.

I am reminded of one more thing in this context. My sister and I learnt Bengali easily and acquired considerable fluency in it in a short while. My skills had particularly been sharpened and polished under the rigorous discipline Ramesh Da. imposed on his pupils. Ramesh Da wore a thick *Choti* on his head which had earned him the nickname "Pandit Moshai". Under his training my Bengali was honed to perfection. However, my own elder brother Tribhuvan, who was also studying at the *ashram* neither spoke nor tried to learn Bengali in spite of repeated reminders. Gurudev reprimanded him in our presence one day. "Tribhuvan", said he, "Your sisters speak such good Bengali but you carry on with your English. From today, you will have to converse in Bengali."

Obeying his orders, my brother resolved to practise talking in Bengali. The target of his maiden exercise was Harihar Prabhakar, the cook in the kitchen of the *ashram*.

Prabhakar was rather generously inclined towards the non-Bengali students. “These students have come from so far”, he would often say to sympathise with us. He often dodged the eagle eyes of the Bengali students and put on our plates an extra egg or the delicious head of curried *rohu*. One day, fish was the main item on the menu. Enthusiastic about his Bengali practice, my brother proclaimed for all to hear in the dining room/’Harihar Prabhakar, aaj ke amakay machh khaney” (Harihar Prabhakar, a fish would eat me today). All he wanted to say was “Aaj ami machh khabo” (I will eat fish today).

The dining hall resounded with laughter to the discomfiture of my brother. The news reached Gurudev and the next day at a literary function, he called my brother and said “Forget it Tribhuvan. You won’t learn Bengali, nor would you be eaten by a fish!”

A major event at *Uttarayan* in those days was an annual literary function in which eminent Bengali litterateurs participated. For us (the students) the event was as important as *kumbh mela* is to the devout. The *ashram*, on that occasion became a sacred place and all our energies were directed towards collecting the autographs of the distinguished writers. I still have in my possession rare and much cherished lines scribbled by Jaladhar Sen, Charu Babu, Narendra Mitra, Sajnikant Das and others. During the function one year Gurudev had asked me to recite his famous poem

Sanyasi Upgupta  
Was once sleeping  
By the walls of the  
City of Mathura.

For me that was a privilege and an honour. Not only that, he introduced me to the audience as a non-Bengali student who could recite Bengali poetry with clarity and finesse. He rewarded me by writing several rare poems in my autograph book which made me the object of much envy among my contemporaries. Many poems consisted of beautiful lines relating to my name. I can’t resist the temptation of quoting one of them.

(You are like Gauri, the daughter of Himalayas. May you bloom like the gentle smile of a flower. May you spread love and may God make your life a spring of peace and tranquillity).

The same day Gurudev made a pencil sketch of the Japanese student, Maki, on the front page of my autograph book as a reward for my literary efforts. Such priceless mementos are still with me, safe like well guarded treasures.

I often recall an interesting incident from my *ashram* days. At one time we, the hapless students were subjected to a daily menu consisting of potatoes and patal (parval). It seemed as if the kitchen staff had purchased potatoes and parvals at cheap wholesale prices and stacked them in the store. Consequently we were served *Patal Bfaja* (fried parvals) for breakfast, *Pataler Dolma* (parval curry) for lunch and *Pataler Jhol* for dinner. So much so that even delectable Bengali fish like *llich* and *Magur* were also cooked and served in combination with *Parval*. We put up with that for some days. Then we got fed up. The *ashram* had students from the princely families of Cooch Behar and Tripura and also from prosperous families from Burma, Java and Ceylon. We all got together to protest against the tyranny of *parvals* and potatoes. First part of the strategy was a silent protest. There was a huge blackboard in front of the reading room which was

used for notices regarding important events. By the cover of darkness one night the black-board was wiped and washed clean. Student from *Kalabhavan* then used all their skills to convey the message. Giant sized caricatures of potatoes and *patal*s (parval) with their heads chopped off were sketched on the blackboard with legend “Down with potatoes, down with *patal*s”. Our silent protest, however, had no effect on the authorities.

Next, we sent a delegation to the executive secretary of the *ashram*. He was a pleasant looking person. He smiled serenely under his moustaches as we presented our petition. Finally, he said, “you are students at an *ashram*. You should stick to the ideal of simple living and high thinking.” “But simple living does not mean that we eat potatoes at every meal” we retorted. Suren *Da* did not believe in wasting his time in fruitless argument and he sent us off without any assurance. We cogitated for a few days and then consulted each other. This time we decided to go to Gurudev. By then he had moved to his new residence named “Punashch”. He was sitting outside, writing something. His favourite attendant Alu *Da* was sitting at his feet. Alu *Da* was easily recognizable even from a distance on account of his round, fleshy face, glittering eyes and a shock of thick, black hair. His eyes began to sparkle as he saw us approach Gurudev. He seemed to have guessed that we were going to complain about something. Alu *Da*, as the personal secretary of Gurudev, shadowed him day and night. He was also the acknowledged pillar of the Dramatic Society of the *ashram*. It would be difficult to find an equal for his inborn talent for improvisation, acting and quick wit. He had a vast repertoire of original jokes and a gift of relating them effectively. He would send the listeners into splits but kept a serious, deadpan expression on his own face. People who have seen him in the movie “Tashar Desh” would never forget him.

Gurudev welcomed us and asked us affectionately to sit down. Then, as usual he asked his servant Vanmali to bring the glass candy jar out of which he gave all of us a toffee each. Then he asked us the reason behind our visit, “What brings you here? Do you want me to preside over a literary function or has your washer man’s finger been pierced by a needle?” The reference was to an incident in which a washer man was injured by a needle left carelessly in a student’s handkerchief. The injury got serious and we all raised money by donations to send the poor man to Calcutta for treatment. The biggest contribution was made by Gurudev himself. We were a little nonplussed for a moment at his question. Then, collecting my wits, I started with the preamble, “Please set us free from the tyranny of *alu* and *patal*”. As it was, we students from Uttar Pradesh were rather badly off in food matters at the *ashram*. Our cravings for *arhar dal* and Brinjal *sabzi* were never satisfied there. On top of that we were subjected to *alupatal sabzi* every day. We added, “For a month now we have been served nothing but potatoes and *patal*s, day in and day out. They add potatoes to every dish. We are fed up of *alu*, *alu*, *alu* all the time.”

Before we could end our tirade, Alu *Da* picked up the end of his *dhuti*, paid obeisance to Gurudev and made as if to go.

“Why, where are you going?” asked Gurudev. The born actor that he was, Alu *Da* looked at us with over brimming eyes. Two huge tears rolled down his chubby cheeks and he said to Gurudev in a hoarse voice “You can see yourself, Maharaj. Can I survive in the *ashram* now? I will quit right away with *Patal*”

*Patal* was the nickname of his younger brother. *Patal Da* had a mental break down years ago. He used to roam the *ashram* at night holding an unlighted lantern and uttering strange, muffled noises.

At Alu *Da's* spontaneous performance all of us burst out laughing and our grievances just melted away. We held Alu *Da* by the hand and made him sit down with us. Later, subdued and swallowing our complaints, our delegation came back to the hostel. I would like to add that that night, for the first time in weeks; we were served neither potatoes, nor *parvals*.

Rabindranath Tagore is recognized all over the world in the spheres of music, literature and philosophy but he was the Gurudev for the inmates of the *ashram*, a most affectionate father figure. He was more deeply committed to his beloved *ashram* than to poetry, novel, painting, music and drama. Can anyone imagine now that the person whose fame is spread far and wide once resolved his pupil's down to earth dispute over potatoes and *parvals*?

### **DISTINGUISHED VISITORS**

A special quality of the *Ashram* was that even the most distinguished visitors felt completely at home there. During his visit to the *Ashram* Marshall Chiang Kai Sheik and his wife went round seeking personal introductions to the students at various *Bhawans*. There was an extremely beautiful Chinese student named Mary Wong in my hostel at that time. She prepared a special Chinese dish garnished with litchis which was much appreciated by them. Pandit Nehru was also a very frequent visitor to the *Ashram*. Each visit of his created much excitement all over the place. On one occasion rehearsals for the dance drama "Chandalika" were on when Nehruji arrived suddenly and sat next to Gurudev. On a special request by Gurudev, one of his non Bengali pupils, Vishni Jagoshya sang his song "Sanjher Jamunai". Nehruji was enthralled by the song. Vishni's melodious voice lent itself beautifully to Rabindra sangeet. Vishni was both a well trained singer and an accomplished dancer. Her exquisitely beautiful face had earned her the title of Urvashi from Gurudev. She was already a well recognized singer associated with the newly commissioned Lahore station of All India Radio before she came to the *ashram*.

Besides Pandit Nehru, other powerful speakers also visited the *ashram* periodically. They included Sarvapally Radhakrishnan and Shyama Prasad Mukherji. Their visits gave us the opportunities to listen to their inspiring speeches. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose also visited the *Ashram*. He was welcomed and felicitated in the spacious ground outside Sinha Sadan. The felicitations started early in the evening. At the end of his own speech he said, "I have said all I wanted to. If you have any questions I shall be glad to answer them."

That led to a torrent of question. Students shot all kind of questions at him and Netaji answered them cheerfully. Dusk fell but the question-answer session went on unabated. It continued under the stars in the open skies with people totally oblivious to the night getting steadily deeper. Suddenly the dinner bell rang and we realized how late it was. The meeting wound up only then. The *ashram* bells followed their fixed schedules irrespective of whether the speaker at a meeting was Gandhiji or Nehruji. The inmates of the *ashram* were familiar with the 'code' of the bell. We recognized the different strokes that indicated meal times, assembly, special occasions, danger or death. Every stroke of the gong's wordless language was familiar to the students. We felt alert the moment we heard the warning bells indicating danger. On one such occasion, a mentally deranged

youth from Santhalgram had set a thatched hut afire. In an instant giant flames leapt up into the skies. Almost simultaneously the warning bells rang all over the *ashram*. The expert fire fighting team led by Upendra *Da* reached the spot and controlled the fire in no time at all.

In case of an epidemic, the Ashram would sometime be closed for summer vacation before the schedule. Gurudev went to Kalimpong, Mussourie or Almora and the *ashram* would be desolate till July. During the month long *Puja* vacation students from far off places generally stayed back at the *ashram*. They were offered special facilities then. They could borrow books from Gurudev's personal library. Most of those books were dedicated to Gurudev by the authors. We got to read extremely fine books, not available ordinarily, in that way. We also read a large number of journals and magazines. We were taken to see the images of Durga being made in the neighbouring villages. Dussehra soon followed for which we all dressed up. Girl students would don colourful new *sarees* and leave their hair open and boys put on tussore and silk *kurtas* with fine edged, crinkled Shantipuri *dhotis*. After paying our respects to the teachers, we would set out to enjoy ourselves. We first went to Gurudev and received his blessings. That was followed by a visit to his daughter-in-law and an exchange of *Bijoya* greetings with Anil Chanda and Rani *Di*. From there we moved towards "Gurupalli". Executive secretary Surendra *Da*, Nandlal *Basu*, Bhuvandanga Dey, Prabhat *Da*, Sudhir Ray, Sudhir Gupta and the ashram accountant Bhujang Babu - we exchanged Dussehra greetings with all of them. We gorged on delectable confections like giant sized *rasogollas* and "Lady Cannings". After celebrating Dussehra we would return to our hostels in high spirits. Ashram rules were relaxed to some extent during the *Puja* vacation.

On one occasion, a well known *jatra* group came to perform in the Bhuvandanga village. It is commonly known that *jatra* performances start late and continue till after midnight. Our warden in those days was a French lady, Christiana Bosnic, affectionately known by the nick name Basanti which Gurudev had given her. She was very affectionate by nature but was a strict disciplinarian. When the girls approached her with a request to take them to watch the *jatra*, she said a firm no. Subsequently the girls quietly went to Gurudev and obtained his permission for the same. Basanti *Didi* could not object to that. After dinner we put on warm shawls, and torch in hand and two maid servants in tow, we set off for Bhuvandanga. A few boys also joined us. We were all agog with excitement as we had never seen a *jatra* performance before. The *jatra* started after a little wait. A character, wearing a gaudy costume of a king entered yelling "You pretentious fool". His voice was extremely raucous. It hit our eardrums with tremendous force. Our French warden stuffed the edges of her *pallu* into her ears and closed her eyes. After a few moments, entered another actor playing the role of Sri Radha. A good looking adolescent youth would have suited this female role but the *jatra* group had assigned the role to an extremely well built young man who was dressed in *saree* climbing up his ankles and who started singing tunelessly in an awkward manner. Bengali spoken in the Birbhum area has a peculiar accent. Our "Radha" addressed "he/' friends in a nasal tone with Birbhum accent as "she" sang.-

"Tell me O Bagdi (a community) sister in law, did I ever tease the son of Nanda? And even if I had some fun with him, why do you resent it?"

The comic effect of this performance generated waves of mirth among us. The above song entertained us girl students for a long time. You could hear strains of the last part of

the song from every room in the hostel. It was invariably followed by general mirth and laughter.

After *Puja* vacation, the hostel would come alive all over again. The new academic session also commenced at the same time. New woman students would come seeking admission to the *ashram*. The *ashram* bus, with “Vishwa Bharati” written on it, made several trips to and from Bolpur station. It picked up all the inmates of the *ashram* from Bolpur station. Dressed in spotless white, Nilamani Babu knew the train timings of each student. He took great care of the bus and kept it looking good. It was the same bus in which Gurudev bade his final farewell to the *ashram*. A photograph taken on that occasion was a cherished possession of Nilamani Babu who kept it carefully in his pocket-book. He had the privilege of driving innumerable eminent personalities in his bus. “I have driven even Gandhi Baba in my bus” he often declared, looking proudly at the vehicle as if Gandhiji was still sitting in it. We were all duly impressed when he said “This is not an ordinary bus”.

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